Books — and Authors

Strange Legacy

NEW ALPHABET SHAW'S DREAM

BY J. A. DAVIDSON

PERHAPS we of the English-speaking world will shortly be treated to a new alphabet of 40 or more symbols. As a result of a rather curious compromise made to avoid expensive and drawn-out litigation over Bernard Shaw's will Britain's public trustee was authorized to conduct a contest with a prize of £500 (roughly $1,400) for the best new alphabet of 40 or more symbols in which each distinctive speech sound has its own symbol. The closing date for this contest was Dec. 31, 1958.

When Shaw's will was read after his death in 1950, it was learned that he had directed that the residuary income of his estate be used for a period of 21 years on a project that would devise and establish "the new British alphabet." This provision was upset in a London court. The judge in giving his decision said that in making his will Shaw "failed almost for the first time in his life either to grasp the legal problem or to make up his mind what he wanted." This decision opened the way for extensive litigation, which was avoided through a compromise arranged by those concerned.

One of Shaw's own major sallies in alphabet reform was in the preface he contributed to a book by a Canadian scholar, the late R. A. Wilson, of the University of Saskatchewan. This strange essay confirms the probate judge's opinion that Shaw was unable to make up his mind what he wanted—but it also indicates that he wanted something awfully badly.

During the '30s, Wilson, who was head of the English department at the University of Saskatchewan, gave a one-term course on "The Origin and Development of Language." Over the years, following good professional custom, he worked up his lecture notes into book form, and in 1937 the book was published in London under the title, **The Birth of Language.**

When the book was published, Wilson sent a copy to Shaw as "an instalment of interest on an old debt." Shaw read the book and became most enthusiastic about it. Then, as Shaw reports, "I urged as strongly as I could the reprinting of Professor Wilson's treatise in a modestly priced edition baited for the British book market with a preface by myself: an overrated attraction commercially, but one which still imposes on London publishers."

IT SOLD WELL

In due course, and much to the satisfaction of both Wilson and Shaw, the book was republished with a lengthy preface by Shaw and a souped-up title, **The Miraculous Birth of Language.** In 1941 it appeared as a Guild Book paperback to sell at ninepence. It has been reprinted several times since then.

With the Shavian garnishing Wilson's book sold very well. It had received favorable notices when first published, but with the new preface it had a phenomenal sale for that kind of book. (In 1942 a Charing Cross Road bookseller told me that he was amazed that such a dry book sold so well. I reported this comment to Dr. Wilson; it amused him greatly.)

The new edition was widely reviewed. Even J. B. S. Haldane, then in his heyday as a Marxist intellectual, was moved by the word "miaculous" in the title to flex his dialectical muscles at it in a lengthy article in **The Rationalist Press Annual** for 1943.

The preface begins with this characteristically Shavian sentence: "This book by Professor Wilson is one in which I should like everyone to be examined before being certified as educated or eligible for the franchise or for any scientific, religious, legal, or civil employment." (Having been carefully examined in the book the year it was first published, and by none other than Dr. Wilson himself, and having been given a satisfactory grade, I feel that I must be pre-eminently qualified for my religious employment as a minister.)

Shaw says that Wilson's name was unknown to him at the time he received the book, as was the University of Saskatchewan. He comments: "I learnt that it (Wilson's professorial chair) was at Saskatoon, a place of which I had never heard, and that his university was that of Saskatchewan, which was connected in my imagination with ochred Indians rather than with a university apparently half a century ahead of Cambridge in science and of Oxford in common sense."

After a few of these introductory pleasantries and a bagful of mixed comments on biology, Sir James Jeans, Dean Inge, democratic politics, the higher criticism, and all that, Shaw confesses, "I had an axe to grind; and I thought that Professor Wilson's book might help me to grind it."

And grind it he does, vigorously, and at some length. The remainder of the preface is a harangue on alphabet reform, a harangue that has nothing to do with Wilson's theories. This grinding of the alphabet axe is not one of Shaw's better bits. It is done very well, mind you, in the master's inimitably forceful prose style—but despite the lucidity and the force of style it is now almost unreadable.

Shaw's harangue is not at all convincing, and it reads in places almost like an extremely clever parody of Shavian prose. Perhaps it can fairly be called silly. (Sir Alan Herbert, in his venture into autobiography of a few years ago, **Independent Member,** tells of a sprightly row he had with Shaw over alphabet reform in the letter columns of the Times. As A. P. H. tells it, he bested G. B. S. I think that perhaps he did.)

There can be no doubt that it was Shaw's preface that made Wilson's book almost a best-seller. The book itself is perhaps not, to use the currently fashionable jargon, a "seminal" book in its field, but it is a competent and stimulating piece of scholarship and it deserves a better fate than being remembered chiefly as a foil for a few rather inept Shavian buffooneries. But perhaps in the years to come Shaw's preface will be noted only because it comes with Wilson't book.

Stimulating Adventure

BELLOW at BEST IN 'RAIN KING'

REVIEWED BY GRANVILLE HICKS

SAUL BELLOW'S "Henderson the Rain King" is an adventure story with large and important implications. Like almost everything else Bellow has written, it is an account of a man's struggles to find and to transcend himself, but Henderson's quest takes him into strange and romantic places. It is as if Bellow were inventing for his hero physical perils commensurate with the inner hazards of his search. However one reads it, this is as exciting a novel as has appeared in a long time.

Bellow has created many bizarre charcters, but Henderson is the most extravagant figure of them all. Fifty-five years old when he introduces himself to us, he is a giant of a man, six feet four inches tall and correspondingly heavy and strong. Rich and of good family, he has by his own account wasted his life. When he thinks of that life, he says, "a disorderly rush begins — my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my face, my soul!" He is a man who is driven, but by what and towards what he does not know.

Henderson at this moment of his life has to go somewhere, and by chance goes to Africa. Leaving his companions and striking off on his own with a faithful guide, he comes upon an isolated tribe, the Arnewi, gentle people, whom he likes. Eager to do them a great service, he brings disaster upon them, and, as so often before, is crushed with remorse.

He proceeds, this modern Gulliver, to visit the Wariri, a sterner tribe. But though his welcome is not cordial, he eventually finds himself on intimate terms with the king, Dahfu, who has studied medicine in missionary schools and who speaks English. This time Henderson's impulses lead him to expend his great strength in carrying a huge statue, and his success gives him an important role in rain-making ceremonies. And since rain does fall, he becomes Sungo, the Rain King.

All this is strange enough, but the strangest is yet to come. Dahfu has a kind of private lion cult into which he tries to initiate the reluctant Henderson, the two meanwhile engaging in intense discussions of the nature and destiny of man. Then comes the climax—a hair-raising lion hunt conducted according to the risky precepts of Wariri ritual. Dahfu is killed, probably as the result of a plot against him, and Henderson has to flee to avoid becoming Dahfu's successor. He returns to America with a lion cub and the conviction that he has found what he was looking for.

Because he has qualities of greatness, Henderson can have heroic adventures as well as comic misadventures, and Bellow's unhibited inventiveness has given his virtues and vices full scope. Bellow has also given him a style of his own. Augie March expressed himself in colloquial language with rich literary overtones. Henderson's style is more purely colloquial, and what gives it its special quality is its headlong energy.

Saul Bellow . . introduces another bizarre hero.

I cannot say that **Henderson the Rain King** is a better book that **Augie March;** the denseness of experience in the earlier novel is something almost unparalleled in contemporary literature. But it is a wonderful book for Bellow to have written after writing **Augie March.** It is a book that should be read again and again, and each reading, I believe, will yield further evidence of Bellow's wisdom and power.

LOOK at the WORLD

A rare event in publishing, the issuing of a new high-grade general encyclopedia, will take place on March 30, their **Macmillan Everyman's Encyclopedia.**" This 12-volume set, manufactured in the United States, is produced in larger format and with larger type than earlier editions. There will be 50,000 articles, with 2,500 illustrations, covering every branch of human knowledge and achievement. The set is so comprehensive that it can be used as a world gazetteer, a world almanac, and a biographical dictionary, as well as an encyclopedia.

It is so up-to-date that it includes mention of **Doctor Zhivago** in its entry for Boris Pasternak. The 12-volume, 9,000,000-word set will sell for $59.95.